

Cuba and the United States

With only ninety miles of water separating them, Cuba and the United States shared much history. Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, was colonized by Spain soon after Christopher Columbus opened the Western Hemisphere to Europe in 1492. By the late nineteenth century, Cuba had become the world's largest sugar producer and a key economic asset of Spain. That European kingdom, then in economic and political decline, needed the income from its Cuban possession. At the same time, the United States had developed important economic interests in Central America and the Caribbean, and staked its claim as the preeminent power in the Western Hemisphere. A dynamic United States and a decrepit Spain headed for a clash.

In 1895, long-simmering Cuban opposition to the rule of the Spanish monarchy burst into rebellion. Many Americans were sympathetic to the Cuban insurrectionists. When the battleship *Maine*, on a port visit to Havana in 1898, exploded and sank, the U.S. Congress blamed the Spanish authorities and declared war. Years later, examination of the wreck suggested that the American warship had suffered an internal explosion and was not sunk by a Spanish torpedo or mine, as first suspected.

As a result of the Spanish-American War, known in Cuba as the Second War of In-

dependence, the United States ousted Spain from the Caribbean and took possession of Cuba and Puerto Rico. The United States sponsored the creation of a new government in Havana, the Republic of Cuba.

During the next half-century, the United States came to dominate Cuban foreign and domestic policy. An act of Congress, the Platt Amendment, until repealed in 1934, provided for U.S. military intervention into Cuba to protect American interests. In addition, U.S. companies largely controlled the Cuban economy, especially the sugar industry. Cubans increasingly resented this strong American presence in their country.

The government of the Republic of Cuba was a failure. Corrupt politicians and military strongmen stifled democracy and undercut repeated attempts at reform. General Fulgencio Batista, who seized power in 1952, proved to be one of the most ruthless of Cuban leaders. He held onto power through graft and the suppression of dissent.

One of Batista's early opponents was Fidel Castro. On 26 July 1953, the former lawyer and political extremist led a small band of supporters in an attack on the Moncada army barracks. It was a fiasco. Castro and most of his followers were captured and thrown into prison. Freed in a general amnesty in 1955, Castro went into exile in Mexico, where he formed the

"26 July Movement." Two years later this group landed near Santiago, Cuba, hoping to inspire a rebellion against the government. Batista's soldiers killed most of the rebels, however, and forced Castro and a dozen fellow insurgents to flee into the Sierra Maestra Mountains.

From his mountain redoubt, Castro sparked the revolution that many Cubans then longed for. He dispatched small guerrilla units that ambushed and harassed Batista's forces. Simultaneously, revolutionaries in the cities distributed propaganda, recruited more rebels, and blew up government buildings. On New Year's Day 1959, with his domain reduced to a few pockets of resistance, Batista fled into exile in the Dominican Republic.

On 8 January, Castro and his supporters entered Havana to the cheers of the capital's jubilant populace. Initially, the new leader did not publicly embrace any social or political ideology, but stressed his credentials as a Cuban nationalist. He promised the Cuban people prosperity, equality, justice, and personal liberty through the efforts of his revolutionary movement.

Castro and his revolutionaries improved some aspects of Cuban life, but at great cost. Castro established an increasingly authoritarian regime, suspended many civil liberties, refused to hold elections, and suppressed not only op-

Cuba and the United States



LC Geography and Map Division



A detailed map of Cuba, 1961. Photo interpreters first discovered missile sites west of Havana, near the towns of San Cristobal and Guanajay. Later, U-2 photography also revealed MRBM and IRBM sites on the northern coast of central Cuba, close to the towns of Sagua La Grande and Remedios.

ponents but even former supporters. Many Cubans were shot, imprisoned, or driven into exile. Moreover, Castro began an agrarian reform program that involved the expropriation of over \$1 billion worth of American holdings.

The trend of events in Cuba appalled U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the leaders of his administration. The American government first pressed Castro to moderate his behavior and when this brought no genuine response strongly criticized him. Mindful of U.S. support for the deposed Batista regime and America's long domination of the Cuban economy, Castro did not take kindly to Washington's involvement. He publicly and vehemently railed against the United States government for interfering in Cuban affairs. Washington responded by placing an embargo on nearly all of Cuba's goods.

Of greater significance for U.S.-Cuban relations, Castro approached the Soviet Union for economic, political, and military support. In September 1959, he signed a treaty with Moscow for the Soviet importation of Cuban sugar, formerly a valued U.S. import. The next year, he requested and received Soviet military equipment. On 3 January 1961, President Eisenhower finally severed U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Even before that event, the Eisenhower administration began to consider the over-

throw of Castro's government. The president directed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to plan, support, and oversee an invasion of Cuba by anti-Castro guerrillas. With the endorsement of the incoming Kennedy administration, the U.S. national security establishment bent to the task. On 17 April 1961, with ships of the U.S. Second Fleet steaming just over the horizon, the 1,300-man Brigade 2506 stormed ashore at Playa Larga and Playa Giron, the Bay of Pigs. For the next two days, the anti-Castro Cubans fought to break out of the beachhead. They were hampered by the lack of adequate training, weapons, and equipment. In addition, President Kennedy refused to provide them with air support for fear of making U.S. involvement in the enterprise apparent. Free from opposition, Castro's tiny air force sank two of the invading force's ships, and drove the rest out to sea, thereby denying the brigade

Cuban leader Fidel Castro meets with Soviet Premier Khrushchev at the United Nations in New York in September 1960. The animosity of these leaders toward the United States prompted increased Soviet and Cuban cooperation in the political, economic, and military spheres.

desperately needed reinforcements and ammunition. Castro's ground forces sealed off the beachhead and then overwhelmed the defenders. The survivors were herded off to prison.

Not only did the Bay of Pigs fiasco strengthen U.S. hostility toward Castro and his movement but it prompted the Cuban dictator to openly and wholeheartedly embrace the Soviet Union and Marxist-Leninist ideology. In his May Day 1961 address, Castro announced to hundreds of thousands of his compatriots assembled in Havana that the Cuban revolution was a "socialist" revolution.



NA 306-PS-60-16402